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THE ORIGIN AND ANTIQUITY OF THE MANDEANS

C. H. KRAELING

The old saw from Shakespeare's Twelfth Night about those who have greatness thrust upon them applies quite happily, it would seem, to the Mandaeans, for in all probability no one would be more surprised at the widespread discussion which they have latterly occasioned than the Mandaic artisans of modern Bagdad and the Mandaic farmers, if such there still be, in the lower Euphrates valley.

The Mandaeans may go on with their normal mode of life and disregard the discussions of their own significance. We, fortunately or unfortunately, can avoid neither the issue they have raised in the minds of scholars, nor the increasing flow of literature produced by the issue, particularly in Germany. The literature so far as it is not already listed in my *Mandaic Bibliography*¹ will be referred to below. The issue might be formulated in the words: Have we in the religious tradition and thought of the Mandaic sect the key to the origin and development of the conception of redemption as it found expression in nascent Christianity and in Hellenistic syncretism?

Now it is indeed a far cry from modern Iraq to the hellenistic Orient. The first task which anyone dealing with the theories of the "religionsgeschichtliche Schule" on the subject of the Mandaeans should therefore set himself is the study of the history of the sect. Only after we have to the best of our ability fixed a place for them in the history of the religious development of the Orient can we discuss the nature and the value of their contribution to the study of Christian antiquity.

1. The Mandaeans of modern Iraq first came to the attention of the western world in the late sixteenth century. It was a Jesuit mission, working under cover of the Portuguese domination of the Indian Ocean, that discovered them living in extensive communities in and about Basra of the Iraq-al-Arabi, where they are said to have numbered approximately fifteen thousand souls, as well as in the neighboring Persian province of Khuzistan. Because they called themselves *Naṣoraïē d'Yahya* (Naṣoreans of John) and

¹ *JAOS.*, vol. 46, pp. 49-55.

because in Arabic *an-Naṣara* is the normal designation of the Christians, the Mandeans became known to the West as "the Christians of St. John (the Baptist)," a name that clung to them in the textbooks for some time.

Neither the contact with the Jesuits nor that with the discaled Carmelites which followed when the British gained control of the East, redounded to the happiness of the Mandaic sect. Enforced privations, military conscription and deportation, all imposed by a horribly misguided religious zeal, ushered in a period of suffering which decimated its numbers to such an extent that to-day the sect is in the last stages of the process of disintegration. One might fancy that the Mandaic bogey haunting the Christian scholars of modern Europe were but the ghost of the maltreated Mandaic sect refusing to be laid and revenging itself upon its persecutors.

Once the curiosity aroused by the initial discovery of the Mandeans had been satisfied they ceased to be a subject of discussion, remaining in this condition of disregard some two centuries. Travellers in the Orient occasionally reported that they continued to exist, compends continued to mention them among the curiosa which compends will mention, but that was about all. Only the new impetus given to Oriental studies in the nineteenth century brought the Mandeans to the fore. Manuscripts of Mandaic Holy Writ, such as had reached the famous Maronite Orientalist Abraham Ekchellensis in the early seventeenth century were now studied with care. Orientalists and scholarly minded officials from France, England and Germany visited the surviving Mandaic groups, studying their language, their living tradition and their customs, and brought with them more and more of the codices in which was embodied the Mandaic theology.

Virtually all the texts represented by these codices have now been published by Lidzbarski.² They represent a body of tradition that compares favorably in size at least with the Koran and the Old Testament. To the evidence thus placed at our disposal for the study of the sect must be added that produced as incidental to archæological excavations into the more ancient strata of Oriental civilization, namely, the Mandaic bowls from Khuwabir, published by Pognon, those from Nippur published by Professor Montgom-

² The three important publications are, *Das Johannesbuch der Mandäer*, 2 vols., 1905-1915; *Mandäische Liturgien*, 1920; and *Ginza*, 1925.

ery and the lead amulets of which one has been published by Lidzbarski.³

The study of these Mandaic texts at once showed that it was incorrect to think of the Mandeans as a Christian sect, or to speak of them as "Christians of St. John". For, though in their mythological outlook they differed but slightly from such as Mani, who none the less styled himself "an apostle of Jesus Christ", there existed a fundamental difference between the Mandeans and all those groups properly or improperly designated in the past as Christian sects, namely this, that they definitely rejected Jesus, considering him to be the very impersonation of all that is evil and deceitful. To the Mandeans Jesus is the Meshiha daggala, the false or lying Messiah, the Antichrist, the offspring of the Evil Spirit herself and the manifestation of the malignant planetary deity Nbu, the Assyrian Nabu or Mercury. A hymn in the Oxford collection warns the faithful against him as follows:

Beware my brethren,
Beware my beloved,
Beware my brethren
Of the worthless Jesus Christ,
Of him who makes false representations
And who distorts my words.⁴

The first part of the ninth book of the "right Ginza" in listing the false religions or "gates"⁵ that exist in the world, presents evidence of calumniations of the Christians no less horrible than those current in the western world according to the testimony of the early Christian apologists.

The nearest approach to the intensity of their hatred of the Christians is found in the vituperations which they utter against the Jews. Of this people, the chosen folk of the evil planetary deity Shamesh, they say:

³ Pognon, H., *Inscriptions mandaites des coupes de Khouabir*, Paris, 1898; Montgomery, J. A., *Aramaic Incantation Texts from Nippur*, Philadelphia, 1913; Lidzbarski, M., "Ein mandäisches Amulett," *Florilegium Melchior de Vogüé*, Paris, 1910, pp. 249-375.

⁴ *Mand. Lit.*, p. 192.

⁵ *Ginza*, pp. 223-234. The use of "gate" for religion clarifies the meaning of the question "What is the gate of Jesus" which was put to James according to Hegesippus (Eusebius, *H. E.*, ii, 23).

He, Adonai, chose for himself a people and founded a synagogue. Jerusalem is built, the city of the Jews, who circumcise themselves with the sword, sprinkle their faces with their blood and thus adore Adonai. The men leave their wives and cohabit with one another. In their monthly period the women have intercourse with their men. They desert the true doctrine of the first days and compose a book for themselves.

To you I say, my elect, have nothing to do with these slaves, who have whored away from their Lord.⁶

This enmity toward Jew and Christian alike presents a peculiar problem to the student of Mandaic lore, for nothing is more certain than that the Mandaic scriptures are replete with echoes of Old Testament tradition and no small amount of evidence can be adduced to show that Christian thought and practice helped to mould Mandaic belief. Burkitt has made something of a case for the use of the Peshitta of Ps. 29, 5-9, in the Ginza,⁷ and much more might be said for the Mandaic observance of the *רֵאשִׁית שַׁבָּת*, the *רֵאשִׁית שַׁבָּת*, or Sunday, as a practice taken over from the Christians.

The difficulty which the twofold attitude to both Christians and Jews presents is that of determining the time and the sequence of the proximity and revulsion therein presupposed. To this question we shall return later. Suffice it to say at this point that the cause for the antipathy against the Christians must lie in the period antedating the arrival of the Jesuit mission in Mesopotamia because the hatred is directed against an organized Church, and is recorded in documents antedating the last years of the sixteenth century.⁸

2. Once the idea that the Mandeans were a Christian sect was dropped by western scholars, it became necessary to find a new place for them in the history of the religious development of the Orient.

When discovered by the Jesuits, the Mandeans dwelt among the Mohammedans in a relatively undisturbed state. As far as the

⁶ *Ginza*, p. 25, sect. 166-167.

⁷ "Note on *Ginza Rabba* 174," *Jour. Theol. Stud.*, XXIX, 1928, pp. 235-237.

⁸ The hatred against Jews and Christians seems to rise out of a period of persecution. It is interesting to note that in their dealings with persecutors the Mandeans were allowed to follow the course of action also permitted to Jews, under certain conditions, namely, that of giving way to their persecutors. Cf. *Ginza*, p. 29, and G. F. Moore, *Judaism*, vol. II, 1927, pp. 106-107.

Mandeans are concerned, this peaceful co-residence has little significance, for in Mesopotamia they represented a religious minority, they loved the Mohammedans not at all and spoke of the prophet as the son of a magician Bizbat.⁹ As far as the Mohammedans are concerned, who were of course in the majority, and who were as intolerant as the Mandeans, though for a different reason, the peaceful co-residence would seem to be significant. It would appear to indicate that the Moslem rulers classed the Mandeans with those called "dhimmi", i. e. the ones with whom a compact for religious toleration had been made.

The Mohammedans granted religious toleration to such as worshipped the one God and were in possession of some form of the revelation of that one God. Now the Koran mentions three groups of *dhimmi*, the Jews, the Christians and the Šabiun or Šabeans, not to be confused with the Sabeian family of Semitic peoples. If the Mandeans were tolerated by the Mohammedans, and if by reason of their animosity against Christians and Jews they could hardly be connected with either of these religious groups, it would seem to follow that they represent the Šabeans of the Koran.

This conclusion was actually drawn by the Orientalists of the nineteenth century in their endeavor to give the Mandeans a place in the religious development of the Orient, and a number of arguments were advanced to uphold the identification. The first was that their Mohammedan neighbors in modern times called the Mandeans Šubba, a broken plural of Šabi, formed after the analogy of the transition from *fa'ilun* to *fu'alun*. The second was an etymology of the word Šabi in which, by the use of the root *צבץ*, the name was rendered "baptists" and thus made applicable to the Mandeans with their well-known stress upon baptismal lustrations. The third was the support given to this etymological identification by reference to a passage in the Fihrist of An-Nadim where the Šabeans are said to embrace the Mughtasila, a sect whose name signifies "those who wash themselves".¹⁰ The last was the similarity between Mandaic and Sabeian practice, such as the northward orientation in prayer and the use of the girdle.

The identification of the Mandeans and the Šabeans which was supported by these arguments and which would automatically date the Mandaic sect back to the days of the tradition embodied in the

⁹ *Ginza*, p. 30, sect. 203.

¹⁰ Flügel, *Mani*, 1862, pp. 133-134.

Koran was not without its difficulties. These difficulties lay in the references made to the Sabeans by late Arabic writers like Moses Maimonides, Shahrastani and Masudi. They tell us, for instance, that the Chalif al-Qahir (932-934) consulted the eminent jurist Abu Sa'id al Ishtakhri as to whether the Sabeans should continue to be tolerated and that he was told that they should be exterminated, since they worshipped the planets.¹¹ The charge is corroborated by an-Nadim (987 A. D.), who adds the information that the Sabeans are dualists.¹² The Sabeans of whom these writers speak are, moreover, said to live in the district of Harran.

None of these facts, if facts they be, really fit our Mandeans. They dwell in Mohammedan times in Mesene, in the lower Euphrates valley, there are dualistic elements in their teaching, but fundamentally they are monotheists, and certainly they never worshipped the evil planets. How then can they be the Sabeans of late Mohammedan times?

Chwolson in his famous work on the Sabeans pointed a way out of this difficulty. He showed that Abu Bekr ibn Wa'hshijah in 903 A. D. distinguished between Harranian and Babylonian Sabeans¹³ and that according to a Christian writer, Abu Yusuf (late ninth century, quoted by An-Nadim), the Harranian Sabeans are really no Sabeans at all but rather a group of pagan dualists who had adopted the name in 833 A. D. in the effort to gain the protection it afforded.¹⁴ The assumption then is that the later Arabic writers have failed to observe the distinction between Harranian and Babylonian Sabeans, and that the latter are not dualists.

It seems natural to suppose that the Mandeans are actually these tenth century Babylonian Sabeans, and that these in turn are the Sabeans of the Koran, but even here there are difficulties. In the first place the etymological argument in support of the identification is weak, the root צבא being the one that actually gives us the form Sabiun. In the second place the Mandeans never speak of themselves as Sabeans, and in the third place we have no way of telling anything about the Sabeans of the Koran.

The uncertainty which exists on these points might at first glance seem to create the impression that it is hopeless to try to trace

¹¹ Chwolson, *Die Ssabier*, St. Petersburg, 1856, vol. II, pp. 543-544.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 541.

¹³ *Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 135.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, vol. II, pp. 14-17.

the Mandeans back of the late Mohammedan milieu, and at least one German scholar, Peterson, has latterly swung to this extreme in his treatment of the sect.¹⁵ He might argue not alone from the uncertainty regarding the identity of the Šabeans, but also from two other premises. The first is that the earliest Mandaic MS. is dated 1590 A. D., the second is that Mohammed is explicitly mentioned in a number of the religious texts.

Peterson's conclusions are as unwarranted as those of some who go to the opposite extreme. A number of facts require consideration in this connection. First, the Mohammedan era, while it was certainly productive of sectarian divisions among the followers of the prophet himself, and while it possibly permitted the survival of syncretistic religious beliefs (viz., the Harranian), was entirely unsuited to the creation of new syncretistic faiths like that of the Mandeans. Second, the Mohammedan era is not the time for the engenderment of that intense hatred of Christians and Jews to which the texts give expression. Third, while the MS. evidence for the Mandaic religion may not antedate the sixteenth century, the Mandaic bowls produced by the excavations in Mesopotamia are at least a millennium older. Pognon dated his bowls in the early days of the seventh century, the language showing slight traces of Arabic influence.¹⁶ Professor Montgomery, whose bowls showed no such influence, dated the Nippur texts about 600 A. D. The oldest Mandaic monument, the lead tablet published by Lidzbarski, is still earlier, as is shown by the script, and was dated by its publisher as early as the beginning of the fifth century.¹⁷ In the fourth place, the language of the Mandeans, an Aramaic dialect, closest to the dialect of the Talmud Babli, is by no means as degenerate and hence late as one might suppose at first glance, for the weakening of the laryngals and of the doubled letter so characteristic of the dialect can be attributed to local variation more readily than to degeneration, as earlier parallels show. Finally it can be demonstrated that while in certain texts the references to Mohammed are integral parts of late compositions, in others they are manifestly secondary additions to pre-Mohammedan tradition. As in the case

¹⁵ "Urchristentum u. Mandäismus," *ZNW.*, 1928, pp. 55-91, and particularly p. 62.

¹⁶ *Op. cit.*, pp. 14-15.

¹⁷ "Ein mandäisches Amulett," *Florilegium Melchior de Vogüé*, 1910, pp. 349-375.

of the double nomenclature, like Yahya-Johana, the earlier Aramaic tradition is found to accommodate itself to the demands of the later Mohammedan era.

All of this makes it necessary to grant that the Mandaic sect existed before the Hejirah. The uncertainty regarding the Šabeans of the Koran then loses its decisiveness for the Mandaic question, and it can at least be regarded as possible that the Mandeans are included among those sectaries of whom the Koran speaks as Šabeans. Lagrange indeed suggests that the codification of the Mandaic tradition, most of which probably falls into the Mohammedan era, was caused by the Mandaean's need of a Holy Book from which it could be demonstrated that the sect shared in the divine revelation, and was thus entitled to toleration.

We have succeeded in tracing the Mandeans back to the sixth Christian century at least. In going on from that point we have two strands of evidence to follow, the outside evidence and that conveyed by the Mandaic texts. We turn first to the former.

3. In discussing the Šabeans, Chwolson asked the question whether the Šabeans of the Koran were identical with a sect called *Σεβουαῖοι* by Epiphanius.¹⁸ Memory of this sect can be shown to have existed in the ninth century from the rabbinical work *Ḥalakhoth Gedoloth*, where it appears with the name *צבויאי*. But memory alone is no guarantee of continued existence on the part of the sect, and besides the *Σεβουαῖοι* are apparently only of local Samaritan significance. Chwolson therefore correctly denied their relation to the later Šabeans.

Very little has ever been made of an excellent bit of testimony on the Mandeans furnished by Theodore bar Khoni (792 A. D.). Among the sects which he lists in his book of *Scholia* is one that he calls the *Dostaiē*. In telling of what they believe he apparently uses a written source, for his testimony is definite and precise. From what he tells us it is further evident that these *Dostaiē* are our Mandeans, or at least an offshoot from that sect. There is excellent evidence of this fact. First, the *Dostaiē* live in Mesene, where the modern Mandeans are found. Second, bar Khoni reports that in the district of Mesene these *Dostaiē* are known as *Mandaiē*. Third, he attributes to them the cosmogony of the Mandeans, the account agreeing with that of our Mandaic texts down to the very

¹⁸ *Adv. Haer*, No. XI.

proper names of the *dramatis personae*, Abatur, Ptahil, Hibil, Dinanukht, etc.

I refer to bar Khoni at this point because in addition to a glimpse into the Mandaic theology he affords us what is to him a story of how the Mandaic sect came into being. The story is of sufficient value to quote in extenso. The passage begins with the superscription: "The Heresy of the Dostaiē which Adu the Beggar taught." Then it goes on as follows:

Adu, as they say, was from Adiabene and came as a beggar with his family to the district of Mesene. The name of his father was Dabda¹⁹ and that of his mother Em-Kushta, and those of his brothers Shilmai, Nidbai and Bar-Haije and Abizekha and Kushtai and Shithil. When they came to the river 'Ubi, they found a man whose name was Papa, son of Tinis, and they asked of him alms, according to their custom, and they persuaded him to take in to himself the indolent Adu on the plea that because of his sickness he was unable to beg. This Papa then turned him over to the guardians of the palm-trees. But when the guardians of the Palms declared concerning him: He is of no use to us, Papa built a shelter for him by the roadside, so that he might beg his sustenance of those travelling the highway. Finally his brethren met and came to his side and there they struck bells after the manner of beggars.

In Mesene they are called Mandaiē and Mashkenaiē and followers of those who do good things, and in²⁰ Beth Armaiē they are called Nazariē, and followers of Dostai. But the name that really fits them is Adonaiē. Their teaching is borrowed from the Markionaiē, Maninaïē and Kantaïē.²¹

Bar Khoni is usually well informed. His remarks on the Manichean cosmogony are about the best we have. With the accuracy of his tradition on the Mandaean cosmogony already conceded, we must admit that his story about Adu has the antecedent probability of being founded somehow in fact. Indeed the beggar Adu links up quite well with the stress of the value of alms-giving to which the Mandaic texts give testimony.

Only one or two things in the account require elucidation. In the first place the story is not really a narrative of the founding of the Mandaean sect. That is evident from the names of Adu's mother and brethren, Em Kushta, Shilmai, Nibdai, Bar-Haije, Kushtai and Shithil. To anyone familiar with the Mandaic texts all of these names are full of significance as the names of genii

¹⁹ Vocalization uncertain.

²⁰ The "in" is conjectural.

²¹ From the Syriac text in Pognon, *op. cit.*, p. 154.

who play important parts in the Mandaic theology. If but one of the names had such associations we might call it an accident. Now that six out of eight show such associations, we must suppose that Adu's parents were themselves already members of the Mandaic sect.

The tale that bar Khoni narrates to show the origin of the Mandeans is then really the story of how Adu and his brethren, coming from a Mandaic community in Adiabene, established a new basis for the sect in Mesene, in lower Mesopotamia.

The second thing to note in bar Khoni's narrative is that Adu and his brethren were not the only Mandeans engaged in this southward movement. It will be recalled that he speaks of a community established in Beth Armaiē the members of which are called Nazaraiē and Dostaiē. The names Mandaīē and Nasoraiē, as we know from the Mandaic texts, are the proper names of our religious sect. We must therefore suppose that just as the name Adonaiē, which bar Khoni proposes for them, merely perpetuates the proper name of the founder of the new community, so Dostaiē perpetuates the name of another missionary mendicant, Dostai or Dositheus, the founder of the community at Beth Armaiē.

The third thing in bar Khoni's account that requires elucidation is the statement to the effect that Mandaic theology is a combination of Marcionite, Manichean and Kantean doctrine.

That Mandaic theology had some connection with syncretism was the conjecture of the Orientalists of the last century to whom we are indebted for the philological investigation of the Mandaean tradition. Exactly what that connection might be no one dared to specify, first because the Orientalists did not feel competent to testify, and second because the texts themselves seemed to be so full of contradictions.²² When at the beginning of the twentieth century Hellenistic syncretism became a separate field of research, the mystery of the Mandaic theology began to clear up, or to deepen, whichever way one chooses to regard the ensuing developments.

Anz, studying the Gnostic conception of the heavenward journey of the soul, found that the Mandaic ideas of the achievement of immortality jibed perfectly with those of other Gnostic texts. Bousset, tracing the character of the Gnostic redeemer and the

²² Nöldeke, *Mandäische Grammatik*, p. xix.

Gnostic conceptions of the seven evil planets, the mother goddess and the primal man, was able to correlate western Gnostic and Mandaean ideas continually. Thus the relationship of Mandaeans and Gnostics, suggested by the Orientalists and already given in the name Mandaîē, which means Gnostics, was given a foundation in fact.

The acceptance of these conclusions signifies that in tracing back the history of the Mandaean sect, we are leaving the penumbra of the sixth century and that, to put it carefully, certain of the Mandaic doctrines at least appertain to a mode of religious thought that had its hey-day in the second and third Christian centuries.

The first question that arises in this connection is whether we can determine more precisely the exact place of Mandaean theology within the development of Gnostic thought. In trying to formulate an answer to this question we return to bar Khoni, and his statement that it represents a hodge-podge of Marcionite, Manichean and Kantean elements.

The first thing to be noted is that derivations such as that of bar Khoni are not to be taken too seriously. The stemmata with which the anti-heretical works abound scarcely ever stand the test or meet the requirements of the systems they embrace, for the criteria by which the ancient writers established the relationship of a given number of sects were usually quite external and insignificant.

To connect the Mandaeans and the Kantians at all seems quite impossible. The little that bar Khoni himself tells us about the latter makes it evident that the similarity between them and the former exists in a common use of the Old Testament and a common reference to Old Testament characters, but not the same characters at that.

The Marcionites and the Mandaeans are more closely related, but in our opinion only apparently so. What they seem to share is a dualistic interpretation of creation. Like Marcion the Mandaeans sometimes speak of the creator Ptahil and his father Joshamin as evil or fallen spirits. The story goes that Joshamin, jealous of God his progenitor, determined to create a world for himself, that to this end he evoked Ptahil, who fashioned the cosmos, and that for this deed he and Ptahil were put in chains until the end of the world. That is good dualistic teaching, but it is an acquired tertiary element of the Mandaic tradition, for if we have read the

texts aright there is in them abundant evidence of another cosmogony, which, by reason of its intimate connection with the Mandaic conception of deity as Life, and by reason of its explanation of the nature and origin of Ptahil, must be considered more ancient and more truly Mandaic than that previously mentioned.

This earlier Mandaic cosmogony, with which we shall have to deal in extenso in another connection, operates with the primitive idea of the primordial egg, or *tanna*, "container" from the root תנא, as it is called by the Mandeans, and with the fruit that sprang from the egg. At the beginning, we are told, הוא פִּירָא בְּנוּ, פִּירָא, the Pira was in the Pira. Being interpreted this means that at the beginning the Pira, Hebrew פֶּרִי, the fruit, was in the Pira, Aramaic פְּעִירָא, Arabic *phagara*, the cleft, the ἀπασσον or ἀβύσσος of fiery water. Within the egg were again fire and water, the symbolism being that of the yolk and white of the egg. A passage in the liturgies tells us how the fiery radiance within the Tanna melted the latter, and how, as a result of this melting, the water and the radiance within the egg were released and began to flow like a great river and mingle with the fiery water of the abyss.²³ From the heavenly stream, the great Jordan, there rises the fruit, or the Life, the deity that produces hypostases of itself by regarding its image in the water and calling this image forth into separate personal existence. The stream itself mingling with the fiery water of the abyss automatically creates the rest of cosmic existence in which are thus combined four elements, the radiance and water of the heavenly stream, and the radiance and water of the abyss. From the texts one can readily construct the nature of the combinations, heavenly water and abysmal radiance producing the firmament, heavenly radiance and abysmal radiance producing the stars, abysmal water and heavenly radiance producing the air, heavenly water and earthly water producing the earth, and all four elements combining to form man.

Although we are dealing in this cosmogony with two groups of elements, the cosmogony is not dualistic, since no value judgment is passed upon the abysmal elements by reason of the abyss's having produced the primordial egg in the first place. What is more important for our purpose is the realization that the opening of

²³ *Mand. Lit.*, p. 25.

the egg, which is the beginning of the process of creation, explains both the Mandaic use of פִּתְחָא in the sense of create, and the nature of Ptahil the creator, who is nothing more than the objectified process of creation, as his name clearly indicates when interpreted after the analogy of Hebrew פִּתְחָהּ and יִפְתָּחֵהּ thus signifying "God opens or creates".

The primitive character of this monistic cosmogony and the explanation which it for the first time affords of the name and origin of Ptahil, shows that the dualistic interpretation previously mentioned has accrued to the Mandeans as the result of secondary Gnostic influences playing upon them from without. That being true we cannot connect them on this basis with the Marcionites, a fact that is borne out by the difference between the sects in their ethical outlook and their attitude toward Jesus.

When in 1904 the Manichean texts were unearthed in Turkestan the basis for the test of bar Khoni's third suggestion was made available. Anyone now comparing the two faiths, Mandaean and Manichean, will be struck by the similarities between them. Of common elements I need only mention the idea of a primordial conflict, of a heavenly primal man, of the heavenly origin and destiny of the soul, of a series of saviors, of a process of redemption which follows the analogy of the experience of the savior and of the personal relation of savior and soul.

The attempt has since been made by Scheftelowitz to derive Manichean doctrine from the Mandeans, the basis being the two statements of An-Nadim that the Mandeans were identical with the Mughtasila and that Mani's father was a convert to the sect of the Mughtasila. It soon became evident, however, that even if An-Nadim's statements are correct, the Mandaean religion is not the ultimate ancestor of the Manichean. The differences between them are too great to suppose that by any process of eclecticism one could from a Mandaean basis arrive at Manicheism. On the one hand we have monotheism, on the other dualism, on the one canons of twice five elements, on the other a canon of twice two, here a primordial conflict disassociated from the process of creation, there a primordial conflict directly responsible for the beginning of creation, here a victorious primordial champion and there a defeated champion.

These same differences, when taken together with the complete divergence in matters of cosmogony, where the Mandeans follow a

tradition otherwise connected with Phoenicia, while Mani follows that presented in the Bundahishn, can be used equally well to show that the Mandaean sect is not a direct outgrowth of Manicheism. The similarities between these two religions find other explanations than those of organic relationship. In part the similarities may be due to Manichean influence affecting the Mandaic sect. We have in another connection spoken of the Mandaean view of the relation of soul and savior as an instance of this kind of secondary dependence.

As has already been indicated, the Manicheans believe that the soul and the savior are related. Expressed in Manichean terminology the soul is the "self" or *grêv* of the savior, an idea to which only the intricacies of the Iranian discrimination in psychological matters could have given rise. The closest parallel to this conception outside Iranian and Manichean circles is found in certain Mandaic hymns where the savior is the heavenly counterpart or "image" of the soul.²⁴ Possibly we have here an echo of Manichean teaching, possibly also we have an independent parallel to the Manichean construction, more probably the Mandaean's own conception of the creation of beings endowed with personality as something that comes to pass through the perception of the image of deity reflected in the heavenly waters has produced this approximation to Manichean teaching.

Some of the similarities between Mandaeans and Manicheans can thus possibly be explained by the hypothesis of Manichean influence playing upon the Mandaean sect, an hypothesis that does not lack probability by reason of the importance attaching to Manicheism in the later Orient. Other similarities will need to be explained on the hypothesis of a common dependence upon common Gnostic tradition. The primordial conflict is a case in point. In the Mandaean tradition it is vividly presented, but it has no bearing upon the ensuing creation and is thus a Gnostic curiosum rather than a part of the Mandaic theology. Another example is the soul's attitude toward the savior. The Mandaic texts actually give us two interpretations of the soul's attitude toward the savior. According to the one the soul is sleepy and needs to be awakened. According to the other she is awake and thirsting for information. In religious experience the two are not mutually exclusive. In

²⁴ *Ginza*, p. 559, lines 29-32.

theological systems they are. Of the two conceptions the one of the soul's being awake belongs to the optimistic view of life inherent in the cosmogony previously considered, in which the very processes of nature take care of the growth and development of things. The other, of the soul's being asleep, is then a secondary accretion. It could possibly be called Manichaen, for Mani has made it a part of his system, but since it appears also in other Gnostic faiths it might better be called broadly dualistic or gnostic.

The comparison of Mandaean theology in some of its elements with Marcionite and Manichean teaching has indicated that we should not take bar Khoni's derivation of Mandaean doctrine any more seriously than the derivations which heresiologists usually present. How he arrived at his impressions we can readily understand. There are similarities in each instance, but the similarities are not those of sects organically related.

The comparison of Mandaean, Marcionite and Manichean theology has a positive as well as this negative result, for in digging down through the débris deposited by successive waves of Gnostic influence upon the shore of the Mandaean texts, we have struck the rudiments of a cosmogony that has the earmarks of primitive thought, and that harks back to the traditions of the Orphic hymns, of Mochos and Sanchuniathon. In the present context we must refrain from following out this line of association and call attention rather to the difference between the Mandaean and the gnostic cosmogonies generally speaking.

Of those Gnostic sects with whom we happen to be familiar all except the Manicheans, who follow the Iranian tradition, and the Mandeans, have cosmogonies directly inspired by the Old Testament. Over and over again we hear how Elohim made the world and created man in his image. That being the case, the exceptions take on significance. We appear to be approaching the primitive non-Christian and non-Jewish elements of oriental syncretism.

Primitive elements appear frequently in the Mandaic texts. The Mandaean hero of the flood, Dinanukht, Avestan *daena-naokhda*, "he who observes the holy law", and of whom the Mandeans say that he sits to-day as the scribe, the learned one, surrounded by many waters, reflects the ancient Ut-Napishtim as Atra-Ḥasis much more potently than the biblical Noah. In the account of Hibil-Ziwa's descent to the underworld we have vivid reminiscences of Ishtar's journey and Marduk's battles with Tiamat and Kingu.

The Mandeans still use the old names of the planets, Shamesh, Libat (for Dilbat), Enbu (for Nabu), Sin, Kewan, Bel and Nirig (for Nergal). Even the old word *ekur*, once applied to sanctuaries, is preserved, being used by the Mandeans to designate the pagan shrines and the demons supposed to inhabit them.

The presence in Mandaic thought of so much that is primitive, and the lack of it in so many other Gnostic faiths, shows that in the Mandaic theology we are not dealing, as bar Khoni thought, with one of those artificial and arbitrary convictions common to the later stages of the Gnostic movement, but with a religion that wells up directly and spontaneously out of the subsoil of Oriental religious genius, and that may therefore well belong to the very beginning of the Gnostic era. Gressmann has coined for this type of Gnostic faith the name proto-Gnostic, a name that may well be used, provided it is not made the excuse for establishing a special epoch within the history of Gnosticism.

4. If the Mandaic texts embodied only Gnostic, or even proto-Gnostic elements of thought, we should have no further difficulty with them. We could suppose that the Mandeans were a second or third century product, and no one would feel hurt. Fortunately or unfortunately, the matter does not rest there, and we must go on to the second strand of the tradition at our disposal, the Mandeans' own statements regarding the antiquity and origin of their sect.

The living Mandaic tradition as reported to the French consul Siouffi by one who had been educated to the Mandaic priesthood, has it that the true Mandaic religion goes back to Adam. In the days between Adam and the beginning of the first Christian century the knowledge of this true faith was virtually lost. Then God sent John the Baptist to restore the lost faith, and John succeeded, a Naṣorean community being established by him in Jerusalem. To this community was attracted a Jewish princess, Maria (Mirjai in the texts). By reason of her conversion the Jews persecuted the Mandeans, killing all but Mirjai and a few youthful followers. At this moment the savior Anosh or Enosh appeared from heaven, destroying Jerusalem and leading Mirjai and the small remnant of the faithful to another spot. From here, where they again incur the hatred of the Jews, the remnant migrates to Shushtar in Persia.²⁵

²⁵ *Études sur la Religion des Soubbas*, Paris, 1880, pp. 1-31.

Much of this living Mandaic tradition is absolutely worthless, as is shown by the fact that it boldly transfers Moses to the days after John the Baptist. Yet some of its salient features are corroborated by Mandaic writ, for instance the conception that John the Baptist is connected with the movement, the idea of the conversion of Mirjai, the ensuing destruction of Jerusalem and the transfer of the sect from Palestine eastward, a transfer that leads it here directly to the Euphrates.

It is not important for us here to harmonize the discrepancies of the oral and written traditions, but it is important to note that both agree with bar Khoni in saying that the sect is not indigenous to lower Mesopotamia. For that we must needs be thankful. In corroborating bar Khoni, however, the Mandaic tradition goes beyond him in affirming that the ultimate home of the sect is not even Adiabene, but Palestine, and that the movement is connected with the work of John the Baptist. At this point we are not so sure whether to be grateful or no, for if the statements are taken at their face value, we have jumped from the days of Gnosticism and the world of Gnosticism to the Palestine of the early first century, a jump that no cautious historian is ready to make without circumspection.

In the matter of the Palestinian origin of the sect, which can be discussed apart from the hypothetical connection with the Baptist, the evidence does seem to favor the acceptance of the Mandaic tradition. A number of facts require consideration at this point. In the first place the Mandaic script is most closely akin to that of the Nabatean and Palmyrene inscriptions. The Mandaic codices, for instance, show the use of a small circle, like that of the Syriac *Waw* to indicate the letter *Aleph*. The only analogy is that of the Nabatean and Palmyrene inscriptions, where *aleph* is represented by a line ending in a small circle. The Mandaic codices lack the initial downward stroke, the line, but the lead amulet, published by Lidzbarski as the earliest Mandaic monument, still shows that line connected with the circle. There is further contact between the Nabateans and the Mandeans in the names of important genii like Nbat, who perhaps personifies the Nabateans or represents their eponym, and like Hauran and Hauraran, who either personify the Djebel Hauran or represent a deity connected with these mountains, such as that to which an ancient seal gives witness in recording the name עברחורן. Further north-Semitic affinities can be found

in the person and name of Joshamin, who recalls the famous Baalshamin²⁶ and in the female demon 𐤊𐤍𐤏𐤍 who recalls the probably Phoenician goddess of the underworld that appears in the Carthaginian inscription as 𐤊𐤍.²⁷ Lidzbarski has made much of the Palestinian provenience of parallels to the names of the two guardian spirits of the Jordan, Shilmai and Nidbai, a point on which he has been taken up by Lagrange, who showed the Mesopotamian occurrence of Σελαμάνης.²⁸ Finally Lidzbarski has called attention to the west-Semitic form of the words by which the Mandeans designate two of their most important religious concepts, namely, the forms 𐤌𐤎𐤏𐤍 for 𐤌𐤎 and 𐤌𐤎𐤏𐤍 for 𐤌𐤎.

In an era of syncretism the argument from the occurrence of north and west Semitic forms and names in the Mandaic idiom is rather weak. We have therefore to fall back on the Mandaic script and the equally significant Mandaic use of the name Jordan. The Mandeans call every stream of running water Jordan, supposing that all running water comes down from heaven in the mountains of the north and flows over the earth until it enters the bowels of the earth through a great cleft. While the uniqueness of the natural phenomena furnished by the Jordan's terminating in the Dead Sea might possibly lead even Mesopotamian sectaries to harbor such a description of the river as the Mandaic texts give, it is hard to believe that the Mandaean sect if it had been born on the banks of the Euphrates or the Zab would in its ubiquitous use of the name Jordan have so completely submerged the tradition concerning its own local rivers.

These are the arguments for the Palestinian origin of the Mandaic sect that can be considered apart from the problem of its connection with the Baptist. As their acceptance by Lagrange indicates, they will require serious consideration. At the same time it must be observed that if the origin of the Mandeans lie in Palestine, a distinction will need to be made between the religious beliefs of the sect in Palestinian and Mesopotamian days. The failure of the German scholars to make this distinction has led to misapprehensions of disastrous nature, as will appear shortly.

²⁶ Baudissin, *Adonis u. Esmun*, 1911, p. 26.

²⁷ Lagrange, "La Gnose mandéenne et la tradition evangelique," *Revue Biblique*, 1927-28, pp. 321-249; 481-515; 5-36, esp. 1927, p. 486.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 485. The name occurs also in the Greek inscriptions of Syria, cf. *Syria, Reports of the Princeton Archaeological Expedition*, III B, p. 7 et al.

If we were to take the Mandeans at their word when they tell us that they are the disciples of John the Baptist, there would be no need of arguing about their Palestinian origin. But can we really accept their contention? That is the next question to be considered.

That baptismal lustrations form one of the central if not the central element in Mandaic teaching and practice will require no proof. Because of its centrality it will undoubtedly refer to the very earliest stages of the Mandaic movement. The same thing is not true of the bulk of the tradition about the person of the Baptist. As the casual reader of the *Sidra d'Yahya* will soon note, the Mandaic stories concerning John merely repeat the facts of Gospel narrative, clothing them in a garment of legendary expatiation such as one finds in the Syriac Life of John the Baptist recently published by Mingana in the *Woodbrooke Studies*.²⁹

While they would probably grant this impression concerning the great bulk of the tradition on John to be correct, Reitzenstein and Lidzbarski none the less point to certain of its elements as evidence of an accuracy of viewpoint only to be achieved among bona fide disciples of the Baptist. In presenting their views we shall try to steer clear of the theological side of the argument.

The first item on the list is a matter of terminology. As we have already seen, the Mandeans speak of themselves both as Mandeans and as Naṣoreans. The first of these names identifies them as Gnostics, being derived from the root נרע. The second was the basis of their once being called a Christian sect, a view which, as we have seen, was erroneous. Now the closest parallel to the Mandaic נאצורא is found in the name *Naḥapaĩos* applied by the writers of Matthew, John and Luke-Acts to Jesus. Of these Christian authors only Matthew offers an explanation of the significance of the name when he tells us that through Jesus' residence at Nazareth was fulfilled the Scripture which says he shall be called *Naḥapaĩos*. The point he makes is that *Naḥapaĩos* is a gentile noun derived from *Naḥapēth*. Lidzbarski, who first took the matter in hand, pointed out that the normal gentile formation from the name *Naḥapēth* would be either *Naḥapēthnós* or *Naḥapāĩos*, both of which appear in the pages of the New Testament, *Naḥapaĩos* requiring the place-name to be *Naḥapēth*, a form not otherwise preserved. The conclusion is that Matthew's derivation is like most

²⁹ Cambridge, 1927.

such derivations, secondary and artificial. Anyone regarding the New Testament *Naζωπαῖος* and the Mandaic נאצוראִיא quite apart from Matthews' hypothesis would normally identify them as the Greek and Mandaic forms of an Aramaic nomen agentis derived from the root נצר after the analogy of Aramaic אַמוראָה and סאבוראָה the well-known names of two groups of Talmudists, derived from the roots אכר and סכר, respectively. Greek *Naζωπαῖος* and Mandaic נאצוראִיא thus really signify "the observant", probably in some technically religious sense. Since this name cannot have been coined for Jesus, as is shown by his liberal attitude toward observance and by the failure of his disciples to understand it, it will have accrued to him most probably, so we are told, from his associations with the more ascetic and observant John the Baptist. Hence its perpetuation in Mandaic circles, as one of the names of the Mandaic sect, indicates that in this particular their tradition is more than merely correct, it is even corrective of the New Testament. The Mandeans must be the true disciples of John to preserve so excellent a tradition.

The second item quoted in support of the Mandeans' true connection with the Baptist is a matter of perspective. As we have already seen, the Mandeans are hostile to both Jews and Christians. In this respect, says Reitzenstein, they preserve a primitive antithesis. It has long been evident that the latter New Testament tradition, particularly that of the Fourth Evangelist, strives consciously to minimize the significance of the Baptist. To explain this fact it has long been assumed that some of the Baptist's disciples, failing to go over to Jesus, perpetuated his message as an autonomous gospel, thus rivalling the early Christian movement and occasioning the polemical treatment of their teacher. The Mandaic tradition, opposing the religion of Jesus as well as that of the Jews, thus preserves the attitude which the true disciples of John were conjectured to have assumed.

The third item to be mentioned concerns a matter of practice, namely, the matter of Baptism and its significance. To the discussion of this item Reitzenstein has dedicated his most recent publication, "Die Vorgeschichte der christlichen Taufe" (1929), one of those intricate mosaics of German scholarship over which one can but marvel and toil. In the Mandaic act of Baptism as known from its liturgy, says Reitzenstein, we have something in the nature of a mystery-rite, mediating forgiveness and mystical

elevation into heaven, now transformed into a rite of initiation. Turning to the corresponding Christian practice, Reitzenstein finds that the interpretations of its significance vary, from the idea that baptism conveys the Spirit (Acts) to the idea that in it one dies with Christ (Paul) and to that of rebirth (John). Of these ideas the first is certainly secondary by reason of Acts' well-known uncertainty as to just how Baptism and Spirit are connected. More significant to Reitzenstein is the fact that though Jesus never baptized, his disciples apparently inaugurated the practice immediately after their Easter experiences. He feels that there must have been something in the baptism of John which made the reception of the sacrament cogent to the disciples once Jesus was no longer with them. This, he finds, cannot be the idea of forgiveness, an idea common to Mandaic, Baptist and Christian rites, nor the idea of sonship or rebirth, for of both forgiveness and sonship the disciples were already aware before Jesus' death. It must therefore lie in the idea of initiation into, or personal identification with an existing group, and in the conception that in the rite the individual shares in the resurrection of Christ; in other words, experiences in a mystical way the elevation which follows upon his death. But this primitive Christian conception of baptism borrowed from John in its fundamental outlines is identical with that found in the Mandaic liturgies, where, as we have said, we get a rite mediating forgiveness and mystical elevation into heaven, all transformed into an initiatory practice. Hence the Mandaean rite is that of John and the origin of the Christian practice.

Let us scrutinize these contentions of Lidzbarski and Reitzenstein.

In his treatment of the name *Naζωπαῖος* Lidzbarski has been opposed by Dalman and others who have felt that there is a possible transition from Mandaic *נאצורא* or Aramaic *נצִיר* to a *kātūl* form *נצִיר* of the *kātūl* *נצִיר* that lies behind the name *Naζαπέθ*.³⁰ Yet the importance of the a-o vowel combination as an indication of nomen agentis forms, and the fact that both the participle *נצִיר* and the nomen agentis form *נצִיר*, which between them satisfy all three New Testament forms *Naζαπαῖος*, *Naζαπηνος* and *Naζωπαῖος*, can be construed as legitimate Aramaic renditions

³⁰ Dalman, *Aramäische Grammatik*, 1905, pp. 178 and 152.

of Hebrew נָצִיר, which gives us the Talmudic נָצְרִי applied to the Christians lead me personally to prefer to accept Lidzbarski's contention and to suppose that the name Ναζωπαῖος has nothing to do with Ναζαρέθ, and most probably means "the observant one". If we take this step, we must, however, take one more and admit with Lidzbarski that the name was not coined for Jesus, but came to him through his association with the Baptist's or other circles. But this does not necessarily lead to the third step, of supposing that the Mandaeans, since they preserve the name in one of its possible forms, are the true disciples of the Baptist. In the first place the use of the name Nazarene is not limited to the disciples of John and the Christians properly speaking, but is used also by at least two Christian sects of whom Epiphanius speaks.²¹ In the second place, even on the hypothesis that the name came to the Mandaeans by way of the Baptist, it does not necessarily follow that it came directly and at first hand.

The same thing holds true of the so-called reception of the Baptist antithesis to Judaism and Christianity. Personally we do not feel that this antithesis was engendered in connection with the movement of John, but even supposing that it had been, it would not need to have come to them directly. The reason is that the Christians and the immediate disciples of John were not the only ones to claim connection with the figure of the Baptist. Dositheus and Simon Magus at least registered similar claims. Why they should do so is as evident as why the Gnostics should almost without exception seize upon the figure of Jesus as the savior. The vitality of the person and the importance of the movement associated with it made the claim to association valuable. If that is true for Simon Magus it will be more than true for a baptizing sect such as that of the Mandaeans.

What the occasion of the claim may have been is a matter of secondary importance. We know that disciples of John, such as Paul may have met at Ephesus, continued to circulate Johannine teaching in some form or other, and personally we should be inclined to suppose that the importance which accrues to John in Mandaic tradition is the result of some contact with individuals carelessly perpetuating the movement he began. Here we find

²¹ *Adv. Haer.*, No. XIX, 1, 3, 4, and XXX, 3.

another argument for the Palestinian origin of the sect, but not an argument for immediate dependence upon the Baptist.

Reitzenstein's treatment of Baptism, Mandaic, Johannine and Christian is a blend of invaluable and hazardous suggestions. That the idea of initiation into or personal identification with a definite group may have had something to do with the reception of baptism by the early church is quite possible. That in baptism the first Christians experienced the resurrection of Jesus is quite improbable. This experience comes to the early Church through the paradosis and through the witness of the apostles, who are chosen in the narrower sense because of their ability to testify on this subject. Paul's idea of dying with Christ in baptism is certainly mystical and in some form it may by reason of Jesus' words to the Sons of Zebedee go back to the most primitive tradition. But dying with Christ is not the same as experiencing a mystical elevation into heaven, and the latter is in the New Testament regarded rather as a future hope than as a present achievement.

With all that it is a relief to find someone who, like Reitzenstein, can discuss the subject of Christian baptism and forget the irrelevant topics of the Hellenistic taurobolia and criobolia as well as the equally irrelevant Jewish proselyte lustrations. Personally we should be inclined to agree with Reitzenstein's general position that the key to the origin of Johannine and Christian baptism will be found in the religious practices of Palestinian baptist sects. By that we do not mean that we must seek its prototype in India, Iran or even pure paganism. All of the Palestinian baptist sects, so far as we are familiar with them, were strongly under the influence of Judaism, and what they show of non-Jewish thought is essentially Semitic rather than Iranian. That the Mandeans have something to contribute in this connection is more than possible, but it is a subject that is theological rather than historical and hence belongs in another context.

As their religious traditions, their script and their use of north and west Semitic forms and names indicate, the Mandaean sect probably did originate in Palestine, the home of other baptist communities. And, while the facts of the case make it improbable that John the Baptist was directly constitutive of their community, they none the less indicate the occurrence of what was for the Mandeans an important contact with circles or individuals perpetuating in one form or other something of the movement of John.

The anti-baptist polemic of the Fourth Gospel indicates that the Mandeans could have come into contact with the followers of John even in the early second century. All that can therefore be said regarding the antiquity of the Mandeans is that, as a sect, they are not without first century affinities.

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